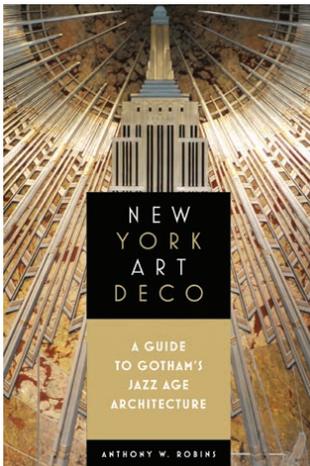


# FOR YOUR ART DECO LIBRARY

REVIEWED BY ANTHONY C. WOOD



## NEW YORK ART DECO: A GUIDE TO GOTHAM'S JAZZ AGE ARCHITECTURE

Author: Anthony W. Robins  
(274 pages, published by SUNY  
Press Excelsior Editions)

It is hard to imagine a more informed and enthusiastic celebrant of New York's Art Deco treasures than Anthony W. Robins, an architectural historian, lecturer, preservation consultant, author, tour guide extraordinaire, and former staff member of the New York City Landmarks Preservation

Commission, Robins has a contagious passion for Art Deco architecture, which is matched only by his extensive knowledge of New York City history and the city's vast collection of Art Deco treasures. Whether large or small, near or far, famous or virtually unknown, if it is an Art Deco structure, Anthony Robins knows it.

*New York Art Deco* is an exuberant romp through Art Deco New York City. Robins's narrative sizzles like the Jazz Age buildings he explores: "Art Deco has become the collective name for all the brash, polychromatic, geometric, whiz-bang effects that could make a neighborhood diner or a multimillion-dollar skyscraper somehow suggest a skimpy dress, a rakish look, and a glass of champagne." His is not a cold, clinical tour of Art Deco but a joyous exploration. So put on that skimpy dress, perfect your rakish look, pop the champagne cork, and join in the fun!

Whether you follow one of the fifteen tour itineraries in *New York Art Deco* from the comfort of your La-Z-Boy recliner or pounding the pavement, Robins will educate your eye to focus on all those wonderful brash, polychromatic, geometric, whiz-bang effects. His clear delight in the buildings jumps out from every page. His lively narrative also covers what we cannot see: the fascinating backstories of the buildings, their architects, and the events and people associated with them.

Who knew you could trace the history of communications through the paintings on the ceiling of the West Street New

York Telephone Company building? Who knew that Allen Ginsberg memorialized the once ubiquitous Bickford's restaurants in "Howl," and that this once-national chain lives on in the cursive lettering still readable on the façade of 488 Eighth Avenue? Who knew the Marine Air Terminal at La Guardia features a glazed terra cotta band of golden flying fish just below its roofline? Anthony Robins knows, of course, and you will too if you dive into the pages of *New York Art Deco*.

In addition to its adventuresome itineraries, *New York Art Deco* begins with a succinct yet thoroughly satisfying introduction to the subject, and the collection of truly dazzling full-page color photos by nationally acclaimed Art Deco photographer Randy Juster, of DecoPix, tucked in the middle of the book, is a delightful bonus. I would venture to guess that the real purpose of including these compelling images could be to further motivate readers to get up on their feet and out the door to see firsthand New York's Art Deco treasures.

*New York Art Deco* is actually a brilliant piece of stealth preservation advocacy. After reading its prose, following its tour itineraries, and understanding Art Deco's place in New York City's history, how could one ever sit passively by and be silent when a piece of New York's Art Deco history becomes threatened? Successful preservation efforts require that the buildings we want to save have been identified and that there is a passionate constituency willing to rise to their defense. This book advances both. *New York Art Deco* should come with the warning label: "This book could turn you into an ardent lover and fierce defender of Art Deco." After reading it, do not be surprised if you find yourself propelled not only onto the streets but perhaps off to a Landmarks Preservation Commission public hearing.

In his acknowledgments, Anthony Robins thanks his wife, Susan, for urging him for thirty years to write this book. In this case the nagging and the wait were both well worth it. All lovers of New York City's architecture and history will want to thank Robins (and his wife) for this great labor of love.

Anthony C. Wood is a preservation activist, writer, teacher, historian, and grantmaker. He is the founder and Chair of the New York Preservation Archive Project and author of *Preserving New York: Winning the Right to Protect a City's Landmarks* (Routledge, October, 2007).

Photos: Anthony W. Robins, from the book.



Bertrand Building, 157 Chambers Street, Manhattan; Victor Mayer, 1931.



Detail, Madison-Belmont Building, 181 Madison Avenue, Manhattan; Warren & Wetmore, 1924-25; storefront by Edgar Brandt, 1925.



Detail, Church of the Most Precious Blood, 32-23 36th Street and 32-40 37th Street, Queens; Henry J. McGill and Talbot Hamlin, 1931.